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ABSTRACT

A study investigated whether some books read by kindergarten teachers to their students represent a higher proportion of female or male characters in text and imagery, and whether there was a higher proportion of female characters or male characters portrayed in stereotypical activities and roles. Subjects were four kindergarten teachers at Gauer School in the Anaheim, California School District. Teachers submitted a list of 10 books that they read every year to their class. Five books were randomly selected from each of the four sets leaving a total of 20 books to be examined for gender bias. Results indicated (1) nearly twice as many of the authors were females rather than males; (2) males outnumbered females in central roles by a margin of 3:1; (3) males slightly outnumbered females in secondary roles; and (4) male images appeared in the books more than twice as often as females. Findings suggest that some of the books used by the kindergarten teachers are gender-biased. Recommendations include: teachers need to be critical in selecting literature for children, avoiding those that have gender stereotypical roles; teachers need to become familiar with criteria for evaluating books for gender bias; universities need to enlighten teachers about the hidden gender biases in children's literature; and the entire school staff needs to provide opportunities for both genders to have the opportunity to participate in roles in school without regard to gender. (Contains eight references; appendixes contain book list data and a checklist for sexism in children's literature.) (RS)

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Gender Bias in Children's Picture Books: A Look At Teachers' Choice of Literature

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EDEL 570 Dr. Kristi Kahl
Spring 1998

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Bright colorful illustrations initially beckon people's attention in making a selection of a picture book. The character(s) or the subject(s) are then examined to determine appeal or preference, and finally a quick thumbing of the pages provides a glimpse of the text before a final selection is made. In making choices for young children, people often may fail to recognize the power picture books may have on influencing gender development.

According to Turner-Bowker (1996) picture books provide role models for children. Through illustrations and the use of language, books define standards for masculine and feminine behavior. Gender role stereotypes affect how children perceive themselves, especially young children. Hartley (cited in Peterson & Lach, 1990) found that by the age of four, girls realized that their primary role is "housekeeping", and the boy's role is "wage-earning." Schlossberg and Goodman (cited in Turner-Bowker, 1996) found that children by the age of five have already formed rigid stereotypes. Gender stereotypes and sexism act as limits to children's potential growth and development (Creany, 1995).

Peterson and Lach (1990) cited several studies that documented the impact of gender stereotypes on the attitudes and behavior of children and their perceptions of gender roles. Campbell and Wirtenberg (1980) found the amount and length of exposure to gender-biased or to bias-free books influenced children's attitudes and the length of time they retained those attitudes. Eisen (1976) found longer task persistence after listening to achievement related stories about a same gender character rather than opposite gender character. In addition, the task persistence was of a longer duration when the amount of recall of the story was greater. Jennings (1975) found that children showed strong preferences for stories in which characters conformed to stereotyped gender roles. However, they recalled more details of the same-gender non-traditional stories for a longer period of time than the same gender stereotyped stories.

The duration of continuous reading has been found to influence children's perception of themselves as well as their perception of gender roles. Ochman (1996) found that girls who were exposed to strong female story characters in sustained reading of non-gender stereotyped stories increased their scores on a self-concept measure significantly. The same results were found when boys were exposed to strong male role models. Barclay (1974) cited in Peterson and Lach (1990) found that sustained reading of non-stereotyped stories reduced sex-role stereotyping.

The importance of the portrayal of gender in picture books and its influence on self-concept, attitudes, potential for achievement, and behaviors did not create a concern until the 1960's and the 1970's with the emergence of the women's movement.

One of the most prominent studies was done by Weitzman, Eifler, Hokada, and Ross (1972) as cited in Turner-Bowker (1996). In an extensive study of Caldecott Medal books honors picture books, Newberry Award winners, Little Golden Books, and others described as etiquette books written from the 1940's to the 1960's, an examination revealed the following trends: an under representation of females in the titles, central roles, and main characters at a ratio of 1:11; occupation roles of males had higher status

than women; and character differences that described women as passive and immobile versus males as active and mobile.

Other studies found like results—a disparity in the representations of males and females. Feminists on Children's Literature in the 1970's found books with a ratio of three male characters for every male. Nilson (1970) as cited in Creany (1995) noted what she terms the "cult of the apron." Of the 25 books picturing women, 21 showed a woman wearing an apron. She noted women were also illustrated as spectators—looking out of windows and doorways or sitting on rockers on porches.

Current research in the 1980's and the 1990's found picture books featuring more females appearing in titles, illustrations and central roles. Creany (1995) noted an increase in books featuring both male and female main characters. Some of the books were gender neutral allowing the reader to make an interpretation of gender. Females were portrayed as possessing more nontraditional characteristics and playing a greater number of nontraditional roles. However, upon closer scrutiny researchers have found that males continue to dominate and outnumber females.

Researchers have focused their analysis of award winning books on not only the number count of females and males in central roles and secondary roles, but the descriptors, the activities and the occupation of the characters. Turner-Bowker (1996) focused on *text*, in particular, the actual adjectives used to describe characters. Heintz (1987) examined the activities and occupation of males and females in fourteen Caldecott Medal Winners 1971-1984. Albers (1996) examined the representations of characters in Caldecott Gold Medal Winners between 1984-1995, noting their positions and the relationships to each other.

The purpose of the study by Patt and McBride (1993) was to examine the frequency of female and male representations, with special attention to pronoun usage, and a comparison of text and teacher comments to determine whether teachers alter pronoun usage as they read aloud. The focus of their research was on books that teachers actually read in their classrooms. In an earlier research in 1992 Patt and McBride found that children use masculine pronouns significantly more than feminine or neutral pronouns to refer to animals or people when gender is unknown. The results of the research revealed that teachers tended to add pronouns which were not present in the text and make them masculine.

Albers (1996) noted that more male authors and illustrators were chosen as Caldecott winners than females. She suggested that females, influenced by gender stereotypes may choose not to become authors, or may tend to write like males if they do become authors. Turner-Bowker (1996) seemed to confirm this hypothesis. She found that there was no significant difference in the way female and male authors used female or male adjectives. Likewise, Albers (1996) also noted female illustrators may also tend to reproduce styles and techniques of the masters of western art, most of whom were male.

Authors today are more sensitive to issues of sexism and gender stereotyping. Blatant based inequities have been replaced by more "subtle gender violations." Researchers are in general agreement that there is a more positive trend in providing a gender balance in picture books. However, they disagree on how extensive the improvements are and in what particular area.

Statement of problem

Caldecott books and other award-winning books were used in much of the research but they do not necessarily represent what the teachers actually choose to read in their classrooms. Smith et al. (1987) cited in Patt and McBride (1993) found that teacher and student teachers chose a greater proportion of books with male protagonists than female.

As the result of her review of research, the author of this paper replicated elements of the design of research by Turner-Bowker (1996), Albers (1996), Heintz (1987), and Patt and McBride (1993) and incorporated some of the criteria used in the studies to examine gender inequities in picture books chosen by the kindergarten teachers at her school, Gauer School. The applied research will seek to answer the following questions:

1. Do some books read yearly by the kindergarten teachers at Gauer School represent a higher proportion of female or male characters in text and imagery?
2. Is there a higher proportion of female characters or male characters portrayed in stereotypical activities and roles?

Description of sample

Included in the sample were four kindergarten teachers at Gauer School in the Anaheim School District whose teaching experience at the kindergarten level range from four to thirty years. Three of the four teachers have earned a master's degree in education. The teachers team in pairs in two classrooms by conducting morning and afternoon classes during the four track year round schedule. The teachers work as a team and plan the curriculum during the calendar year. Each class has approximately 33 students.

The selection of picture books was made from the teachers' personal collections or from the school library. One of the teachers has an extensive collection of books and regularly shares books that coincide with the prevailing theme. As would be expected, some of the books are "old traditional stories" that date as far back as the 1930's.

Research Design and Methods

Selection of books for this study was made by asking each teacher to submit ten books that they read every year to their class. Limitations were not made as to subject or copyright date. Five books were then randomly selected from each of the four sets leaving a total of 20 books to be reviewed for this study.

The books were examined to determine whether they are gender biased. The criteria for examination included the following:

1. gender of the author
2. number of males and females in central roles
3. number of males and females in secondary roles
4. frequency of female and male images
5. roles of the male and female characters
6. activity (active or passive) of the characters
7. the use of male and female nouns, pronouns, and possessive pronouns

The statistics for each criteria (1-4) were totaled to determine if there is a dominance of males or females. Only characters that revealed gender in dress and/or text were counted. The text of each book was examined to define roles of characters, the activities the characters engaged in, and the nouns, pronouns, and possessive pronouns used.

Results

The examination of the books revealed the following:

1. There were nearly twice as many female authors as male authors.
2. There were more males than females in central roles at a ratio of 3:1.
3. There were slightly more males than females in secondary roles.
4. Male images appeared in the books more than twice as often as females. (Refer to Appendix A)

When gender roles were examined males were portrayed in more varied roles than females. Women tended to assume more traditional roles, except for zoo keeper and baseball player. Besides the traditional masculine roles, males were cast as artist, traveler, jewelry store owner, sailor, and herdsman. Most of the animals were given masculine identities. The littlest animal, the mouse, was given a feminine identity.

Gender Roles of Characters

Females		**Males**		
girl	Animal/Object	boy	Animal/Object	
daughter	sheep	son	cow	badger
granddaughter	mouse	father	fox	rabbit
mother	train	grandfather	sheep	duck
librarian		artist	mole	bear
baseball player		herdsman	horse	train
librarian		traveler	sailor	tow truck
zoo keeper		jewelry store owner	hedgehog	
		sailor	caterpillar	

When nouns, pronouns, and possessives were tallied, the results revealed that more than twice the number of male than female nouns, pronouns, and possessives were in the text

of the twenty books. Four of the books, *The Little Engine That Could, Play Ball, Kate, Miss Rumphius*, and *The Napping House*, show a greater number of female nouns, pronouns, and possessives. However, the books portray femininity as weak, in need of encouragement and support to succeed, in a role of a sleeping mother/grandmother, planting flowers to make the world beautiful, etc. The positive female numbers seem to show them fulfilling the traditional female roles, except for Kate who plays baseball. However, this book shows more male images that support her in her success as a ball player.

In analyzing the activities of the characters, males were more active than the females. Males were engaged in the following activities: carrying yarn, climbing trees, walking and sliding on the snow, peering in a tree, catching a mitten, running, and guarding livestock, fighting with a troll, confronting a bear, planting seeds, and seeking a wild horse. Females, on the other hand, were engaged in the following activities: spinning yarn, knitting, cooking, sitting next to the fireplace, feeding geese, napping and greeting a child.

The results of this study substantiate the claim by researchers that there has been a trend toward more gender equity in picture books since Weitzman et al.'s study was done in 1972 where males in central characters outnumbered females 1:11 in books that were published before 1970. In comparing the 9 books that were published before 1970 and the 11 books published after 1970, there is an increase in the number of females in central roles in the more current books. Before 1970, 8 out of the 9 books featured male characters, leaving only one book that featured a female in a central role. In the 11 books published after the 1970s, 6 books portrayed only male characters, 2 books featured only female characters, and 3 books portrayed both female and male characters in central roles. It is evident that the research by Weitzman et al. had a positive impact on publishers and authors to provide readers with more gender balance in their books.

Although there has been a rise in the number of females in central roles, the number of gender images do favor males (Albers, 1996). In the image count in all the books in this study, 17 of the books show a dominance of male images, 2 show more female images and 1 book shows an equal number of males and females. There is more gender equity in secondary roles. Albers suggests it is easy to change main characters to provide for gender equity but when a closer examination is made, there is evidence of a dominance of masculine presence in picture books.

Conclusions

From this research the conclusion may be made that some of the books used by the kindergarten teachers at Gauer are gender-biased. Since about half of the books were published before 1980, it was not a surprising outcome of this study. It confirmed what many researchers have found in studying picture books. Gender bias in current books are more subtle, but it continues to favor males. By replicating some of the research design used in previous studies, the statistics compiled came to the same conclusion.

Although there were twice as many female authors the books were dominated by male characters. Albers (1996) suggested that female authors have internalized the male perspective in their writing. Turner-Bowker (1996) also found that both male and female authors chose like descriptors for their male and female characters.

Teachers and parents need to make a conscious effort to select books that reflect a fairness to both genders. Since young children cannot make this choice, the responsibility must be fulfilled by adults.

Recommendations

To determine how to used gender-biased books already in teachers' personal collection, the following suggestions have been made by some researchers:

- Creany (1995) suggested that children should not be denied access to gender biased books. Instead, children and adults should examine and discuss their own gender stereotypes.
- Patt and McBride (1993) found that teachers very often do not read books verbatim to children, and are aware that they modify their language as they read. The researchers suggested that teachers should make a conscious effort to alter their language to include more feminine or neutral pronouns. They can also label neutral characters as female to increase the female representation.
- Albers (1996) suggested that conversation with children should question the inclusion or exclusion of males or females. Teachers should " rethink curricula that integrates and redefines the roles of females." She also suggested using role playing to help learners understand what is missing in the text.

In addition, the author of this paper has the following recommendations for teachers, principals, librarians, and school personnel:

- Teachers need to be critical in selecting literature for children, avoiding those that have gender stereotypical roles.
- Teacher, parents, and care-givers need to be critical in evaluating books for gender bias.
- Teachers need to become familiar with criteria for evaluating books for gender bias such as a checklist. (Refer to Appendix B)
- Librarians need to make a concerted effort to stock their shelves with books that are equally representative of both benders.
- Inservices and universities need to enlighten teachers about the hidden gender biases in children's literature.
- Workshops should be provided that allow for an evaluation of the gender biases of teachers to make them aware of their own gender perspective.
- The entire school staff needs to provide opportunities for both genders to have the opportunity to participate in roles in school without regard to gender.
- Authors need to be aware of gender bias when writing and publishing books.

- Continued research is needed to determine the effects of gender bias in books on young children.

Patt and McBride (1993) found a disturbing outcome of their study. Despite nearly two decades of research to eliminate gender bias in the classroom, teachers did not seem to regard gender bias as a concern in choosing books making children the ultimate victims of their irresponsibility. It is imperative that teachers and parents maintain a vigil against gender bias in the literature they share with young children.

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Book List Data

Year	Title	Author-Gender	# of Characters Central	Second	#Images
1932	Ask Mr. Bear	Flack - M	0=f,2=m	6=f,0=m	6=f,22=m
1945	The Carrot Seed	Krauss-F	0=f,1=m	1=f,2=m	2=f,18=m
1954	The Little Engine That Could	Watty- F	2=f,0=m	1=f,4=m	21=f,41=m
1959	Indian Two Feet	Friskey-F	0=f,1=m	0=f,2=m	16=f51=m
1962	The Snowy Day	Keats-M	0=f,1=m	1=f,0=m	1=f,19=m
1963	Where the Wild Things Are	Sendak-M	0=f,1=m	0=f,1=m	0=f,17=m
1964	Whistle for Willie	Keats-M	0=f,2=m	1=f,1=m	4=f,26=m
1966	a Rainbow of My Own	Freeman-M	0=f,1=m	0=f,0=m	0=f,20=m
1969	The Hungry Caterpillar	Carle-M	0=f,1=m	0=f,0=m	0=f,11=m
1973	The Three Billy Goats Gruff	Galdone-M	0=f,4=m	0=f,0=m	0=f,30=m
1976	The Golden Egg Book	Brown-F	0=f,2=m	0=f,0=m	0=f,32=m
1981	Bringing the Rain to Kapiti Plain	Aardema-F	0=f,1=m	2=f,1=m	10=f,10=m
1981	Play Ball, Kate	Gordon-F	1=f,0=m	0=f,0=m	27=f40=m
1982	Miss Runphius	Cooney-F	2=f,1=m	0=f,1=m	62=f56=m
1984	The Napping House	Wood-F	1=f,0=m	0=f,0=m	15=f,0=m
1984	How My Parents Learned to Eat	Friedman-F	1=f,2=m	0=f,0=m	45=f47=m
1986	Who's in the Shed	Parkes-F	0=f,1=m	3=f,0=m	20=f,1=m
1987	How Many Trucks Can a Tow Truck Tow	Pomerantz-F	0=fm1=m	1-f,2=m	6=f,31=m
1989	The Mitten	Brett-F	0=f,1=m	2=f,7=m	9=f,73=m
1992	A Visit to Australia	Packard-F	1=f,1-m	1=f0=m	20=f20=m
F / f = female M / m = male		TOTAL	7=F,23M	19F,22M	244F,545M

Appendix A

Checklist for Sexism in Children's Literature

1. Are girls rewarded for skills and competence rather than beauty?
2. Is a realistic proportion of mothers shown at work outside the home?
3. Are some of their jobs other than administrative or technical jobs?
4. Are fathers shown raising or spending time with children?
5. Do all members of the family participate equally in household chores?
6. Do girls and boys participate equally in physical activities?
7. Do male and female characters respect each other as equals?
8. Are both girls and boys shown to be self-reliant, clever and brave--capable of facing their own problems and finding their own solutions?
9. Are there any derogatory gender-stereotyped characterizations, such as "Boys make the best architects" or "Girls are silly"?
10. Are both girls and boys shown as having a wide range of sensibilities, feelings, and responses?
11. Is the male pronoun (e.g., mankind, he) used to refer to all people?
12. Are girls' accomplishments, not their clothing or features, emphasized?
13. Are non-human characters and their relationships personified in gender stereotypes (e.g., dogs depicted as masculine, cats as feminine)?
14. Are the women and girls portrayed as docile and passive and in need of help?
15. Does the material reflect the conditions and contributions of women in today's society?
16. Are women in cultures other than the dominant one depicted accurately?
17. Are traits such as strength, compassion, initiative, warmth and courage treated as human rather than gender-specific?
18. Does the material encourage both girls and boys to see themselves as human beings with an equal right to all benefits and choices?

Arnow, Jan (1995) *Teaching Peace*. Berkeley Publishing Group, New York, NY

Appendix B